

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *The Other Boleyn Girl*

Author: Philippa Gregory

Born January 9, 1954, in Nairobi, Kenya; emigrated to England with family c. 1956; daughter of A.P. (a radio operator and navigator) and Elaine Gregory; married; husband's name Anthony; children: Victoria, Adam. Education: University of Sussex, B.A. (with honors), 1978; University of Edinburgh, M.Litt., 1980, Ph.D., 1984. Politics: "Radical." Avocational Interests: Riding, walking, skiing, and gardening. Addresses: Home: Northeast England. E-mail: info@philippagregory.com.

Name: Philippa Gregory

Born: January 9, 1954

Nationality: Kenyan, British

Education: University of Sussex, B.A. (with honors), 1978; University of Edinburgh, M.Litt., 1980, Ph.D., 1984.



Career:

Writer, journalist, and educator. Provincial journalist for newspapers in England, 1971-75; BBC-Radio, Southampton, England, radio journalist, 1978-80 and 1984—. Has taught at the University of Durham, the Open University, and Teeside Polytechnic; fellow of Kingston University, 1994. Also founding member and vice president of Hartlepool People, a community center for the unemployed and low paid.

Awards:

Parker Romantic Novel of the Year Award, Romantic Novelists Association, 2002, for *The Other Boleyn Girl*.

Writings:

Wideacre Trilogy:

Wideacre, Viking (London, England), 1987, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 1988.

The Favoured Child, Viking (London, England), 1989, Pocket Books (New York, NY), 1990.

Meridon, Viking (London, England), 1990, Pocket Books (New York, NY), 1991.

Earthly Joys Series:

Earthly Joys, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1998.

Virgin Earth, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1999.

Children Books:

Princess Florizella, Kestrel-Kite (England), 1988.

Florizella and the Wolves, illustrated by Patrice Aggs, Walker Books (London, England), 1991, Candlewick Press (Cambridge, MA), 1993.

A Pirate Story, Walker Books (London, England), 2000.

Florizella and the Giant, Walker Books (London, England), 2000.

Other:

Mrs. Hartley and the Growth Centre, Penguin Books (New York, NY), 1992.

The Wise Woman, Pocket Books (New York, NY), 1993.

A Respectable Trade, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1995.

Fallen Skies, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1995.

The Little House: A Novel, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1996.



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Other: (continued)

Perfectly Correct, Acacia Press (England), 1997.

Midlife Mischief, Severn House (New York, NY), 1998.

Bread and Chocolate (short stories), HarperCollins (London, England), 2000.

Zelda's Cut, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2000.

The Other Boleyn Girl, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2001.

The Queen's Fool: A Novel, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 2004.

The Virgin's Lover, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 2004.

The Constant Princess, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 2005.

The Boleyn Inheritance, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 2006.

Also author of *Draco, Mi Pequeno Dragon, Serres Ediciones*. Columnist for *Guardian* under pseudonym Kate Wedd; contributor of articles and reviews to women's magazines and newspapers.

Media Adaptations:

The Other Boleyn Girl was adapted as a television film, directed and written by Philippa Lowthorpe for BBC Films, 2003; author's novels have been adapted as audiobooks, including *Zelda's Cut*, Ulverscroft, 2003.



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Sidelights:

Philippa Gregory has achieved success as an academic, journalist, children's writer, and novelist. Her historical novels have earned her critical as well as popular success. She is perhaps best known for the novels in the "Wideacre" trilogy. These novels follow the Laceys, a family of wealthy eighteenth-century English landowners, and show a keen concern for issues of class, specifically the disparity between the riches of those who own land and the poverty of those forced to farm it. The first novel in the series, *Wideacre*, centers on the evil Beatrice Lacey, who introduces a series of enclosures designed to appropriate land from the villages of Wideacre. Beatrice's avarice ultimately leads to an uprising in which she and her brother are killed. The novel's sequel, *The Favoured Child*, describes the conflict between Julia Lacey and Richard MacAndrew. Actually siblings, but believing themselves to be cousins, the pair are at odds over the management of Wideacre. Angry over Julia's rejection of the traditional landowner model and jealous of her subsequent success, Richard rapes her and forces Julia into marriage. At the story's climax, Julia gives away their child, Sarah, to a group of gypsies and Richard is killed by their estate manager, who had led the revolt against Beatrice. *Meridon*, the final story in the series, depicts the return of Sarah Lacey to Wideacre, which has by now become a model estate. In this novel, the land-hungry Lady Havering tries to unite her own estate, which is the antithesis of Wideacre, with Sarah's property through the marriage of Sarah and the Havering heir, a drunken gambler. Kate Thompson, commenting on the "Wideacre" trilogy in *Twentieth-Century Romance and Historical Writers*, declared that it is "rightly the focus of any appraisal of Gregory's work," but added that the author's other books also "demonstrate Gregory's power, talent and above all, the sheer readability of her novels."

Gregory once told *CA*: "The novels in the 'Wideacre' trilogy have all been set in the eighteenth century—a period I am familiar with from my doctoral research and one of those crucial periods in which decisions determined the whole future of the country. In the case of England's agricultural revolution the decision was made to starve the poor for the greater profit of the landlords. The legacy of that decision in terms of class snobbery and hardship for low-paid working people is still with us today. "Since I completed *Meridon* I have found myself writing short stories and increasing my work in children's fiction. I love writing for children because I enjoy their sense of humor—I always test out my stories on my daughter and her friends."

Despite her forays into children's books, Gregory has continued to produce a wide range of historical fiction as well as some modern-day tales. Gregory offered another "intense, absorbing" historical drama with her 1993 publication, *The Wise Woman*, described by a *Publishers Weekly* contributor as "a grisly drama of passion and witchcraft in 16th-century England." Alys, the protagonist, is raised as an apprentice to a witch, but escapes her life of servitude by joining a religious order. Her peaceful interlude in the abbey is shattered when the place is burned to the ground by the drunken Lord Hugo. She returns to her mistress and is then summoned as a healer to Lord Hugo's castle, where she finds herself attracted to him despite his bloody past. She begins to work witchcraft to destroy his marriage, and finds herself sinking deeper and deeper into evil. "Only a truly shocking gesture can bring about her salvation," noted the *Publishers Weekly* contributor. "Gregory adeptly manipulates hair-raising horror and mounting suspense, brilliantly evoking the period's turbulent atmosphere."

The author tried her hand at a contemporary tale with *The Little House*, the story of an upper-middle-class couple and their failing marriage. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor commented that the story "treats familiar, ... domestic ground with a horrific tilt," but warned that while "Gregory writes smoothly enough, ...her insights into the dysfunctional family are only pedestrian, laying fallow ground for a surprise ending that neither horrifies nor enlightens." Better-received was her 1998 offering, *Earthly Joys*. This story concerns John Tradescant, a renowned botanical collector and gardener, who is planning a series of elaborate gardens for Sir Robert Cecil, an advisor to Queen Elizabeth I, King James I, and the duke of Buckingham. In that position, he has access to a great deal of privileged information, and is eventually commissioned as a spy to safeguard the security of the kingdom. *Booklist* contributor Margaret Flanagan called it "a cleverly conceived and executed historical narrative spanning one of the most intriguing and turbulent eras in British history." Kathy Piehl noted in the *Library Journal* that the "strong plotting, intriguing characters, and rich evocation of a time and place will leave readers eager for the promised sequel."



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In *Virgin Earth*, Gregory tells the story of John Tradescant the younger, a royal gardener who travels from England to Virginia to look for new plants for the King's gardens. He soon meets the Powhatan Indians and is helped in his search for plants by the Indian maiden Suckahanna. John eventually returns to England, where he marries. But when he must flee from political turmoil in England, he sails back to Virginia, where he is rescued by the Powhatans in the wilderness. He joins the tribe, and then faces a test of his loyalties when the tribe wants him to kill settlers. Deborah Rysso, writing in *Booklist*, called the story a "fascinating account of one man's life in two different worlds."

Gregory tells a modern-day tale of a writer with financial problems and an identity crisis in *Zelda's Cut*. Isobel Latimer is a literary novelist who turns to writing popular trashy novels in order to earn money. However, not only does Isobel write under the new pen name of Zelda Vere, she also makes appearances as Zelda, disguised to look like a sexy blonde instead of her more matronly self. When her first novel becomes a bestseller, Isobel, or Zelda, finds herself propelled into a jet set world of sex and drugs that threatens her already unhappy marriage. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor noted that the author "knows whereof she speaks when she describes television interviews and book deals." Bonnie Johnston, writing in *Booklist*, commented that the author's "deftly written tale offers a great deal of insight into the human soul."

Returning to England's past for the setting of her novel *The Other Boleyn Girl*, Gregory tells the story of Mary Boleyn, who was a mistress of Henry VIII before her sister, Anne Boleyn, went on to marry the king. Told through the eyes of Mary, readers are given a new perspective on the intrigues of the King and the disastrous fate of Anne. "Gregory captures not only the dalliances of court but the panorama of political and religious clashes throughout Europe," wrote Kathy Piehl in the *Library Journal*. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor called the novel a "fresh, wonderfully vivid retelling of the story."

In the *Queen's Fool*, teenage Hannah Green, a Jewish refugee along with her father from the Spanish Inquisition, is masquerading as a boy so she can work in her father's sixteenth-century Tudor print shop. When Lord Dudley visits the shop on business, he learns that Hannah has the gift of second sight and engages her to be the King's fool and to spy on Edward VI's sister Mary, a Catholic who eventually succeeds the Protestant Edward when he dies. Although Hannah has grown close to Mary, she once again follows Dudley's orders and becomes close to Mary's sister Elizabeth as well. As a result, Hannah finds herself caught up in further court intrigue as Mary lashes out against the Protestants and Elizabeth soon faces the possibility of execution. A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor called the novel "another intelligent and engrossing tale of Tudor England from Gregory."

Gregory remains in the world of the Tudors with *The Virgin's Lover*. Elizabeth has survived the threat to her life and is the newly crowned Queen. Lord Dudley woos the Queen despite being married. His wife, Amy Robsart Dudley, suffers as the scandalous relationship between her husband and the Queen becomes common knowledge. "Gregory weaves an engrossing tale of passion, love, and betrayal," wrote Anna M. Nelson in the *Library Journal*. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor commented that "readers addicted to Gregory's intelligent, well-researched tales of intrigue and romance will be enthralled."

Once again setting her story in Tudor England, Gregory focuses on Katherine of Aragon in her novel *The Constant Princess*. The teenage daughter of the King and Queen of Spain, Katherine has been promised in marriage to Prince Arthur, who will one day become King of England. Arthur dies only two years after they are married. But he first tells his wife to marry the younger Prince Harry to still fulfill her destiny as the future Queen. Kathy Piehl, writing in the *Library Journal*, described Katherine as a "vulnerable and complex character." A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor wrote: "Gregory makes the broad sweep of history vibrant and intimate—and hinges it all on a bit of romance."

The Boleyn Inheritance continues the story of Henry VIII's tumultuous married life where *The Other Boleyn Girl* leaves off. The story is alternately told by three characters: Anne of Cleves, Henry's German-born fourth wife; Katherine Howard, his teenaged fifth wife; and Anne's scheming lady-in-waiting Jane Boleyn. Jane plots



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to remove Anne of Cleves from the throne by encouraging Henry's infatuation with the young Katherine, who becomes his consort within days after his marriage to Anne is annulled. The young queen later falls victim to Jane's machinations when she is accused of adulterous behavior and subsequently beheaded. Gregory, maintained Ludovic Hunter-Tilney in an article for the *Financial Times*, plots "enough twists and turns to turn her tale into an engaging example of the genre." *Lexington Herald-Leader* reviewer Heather Chapman remarked that Gregory "gamely plunges in with an array of painstaking research and shrewd guesswork on her side." Chapman pointed to "the framing device of the story, the pacing, and the intricate plot" as areas of strength.



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Further Readings:

Books:

Twentieth-Century Romance and Historical Writers, 3rd edition, St. James Press (Detroit, MI), 1994.

Periodicals:

Booklist, May 1, 1993, Jim Jeske, review of *Florizella and the Wolves*, p. 1588; October 1, 1993, Denise Perry Donavin, review of *The Wise Woman*, p. 195; October 15, 1996, Liz Rifken, review of *The Little House: A Novel*, p. 404; September 15, 1998, Margaret Flanagan, review of *Earthly Joys*, p. 199; November 1, 1999, Deborah Rysso, review of *Virgin Earth*, p. 508; January 1, 2001, Bonnie Johnston, review of *Zelda's Cut*, p. 915.

Entertainment Weekly, November 26, 2004, Missy Schwartz, review of *The Virgin's Lover*, p. 123; December 9, 2005, Jessica Feder, review of *The Constant Princess*, p. 94.

Financial Times, October 7, 2006, Ludovic Hunter-Tilney, review of *The Boleyn Inheritance*, p. 41.

Kirkus Reviews, November 15, 2003, review of *The Queen's Fool: A Novel*, p. 1329; October 1, 2005, review of *The Constant Princess*, p. 1046.

Lexington Herald-Leader, January 17, 2007, Heather Chapman, "Another Great Peek at Henry VIII's Wives' Lives," review of *The Boleyn Inheritance*.

Library Journal, July, 1989, Ellen R. Cohen, review of *The Favored Child*, p. 108; October 15, 1993, M.E. Chitty, review of *The Wise Woman*, p. 87; October 1, 1996, Caroline M. Hallsworth, review of *The Little House*, p. 404; September 1, 1998, Kathy Piehl, review of *Earthly Joys*, p. 213; December, 1999, Kathy Piehl, review of *Virgin Earth*, p. 185; April 15, 2002, Kathy Piehl, review of *The Other Boleyn Girl*, p. 125; September 15, 2004, Anna M. Nelson, review of *The Virgin's Lover*, p. 48; October 1, 2005, Kathy Piehl, review of *The Constant Princess*, p. 65.

New Statesman, April 8, 1988, Carole Morin, review of *Wideacre*, p. 27.

New Statesman & Society, June 19, 1992, Kay Parris, "Mrs. Hartley and the Growth Centre," p. 24.

New York Times Book Review, November 1, 1998, Betsy Groban, review of *Earthly Joys*, p. 23.

Publishers Weekly, December 26, 1986, Sybil Steinberg, review of *Wideacre*, p. 48; May 12, 1989, Sybil Steinberg, review of *The Favored Child*, p. 284; June 8, 1990, Sybil Steinberg, review of *Meridon*, p. 47; October 4, 1993, review of *The Wise Woman*, p. 64; September 9, 1996, review of *The Little House*, p. 66; July 6, 1998, review of *Earthly Joys*, p. 50; December 4, 2000, review of *Zelda's Cut*, p. 54; May 27, 2002, review of *The Other Boleyn Girl*, p. 38; September 20, 2004, review of *The Virgin's Lover*, p. 43.

School Library Journal, May, 1993, JoAnn Rees, review of *Florizella and the Wolves*, p. 105.

Online:

Philippa Gregory Home Page, <http://www.philippagregory.com> (June 17, 2007).

Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2008. Reproduced in Biography Resource Center. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Gale, 2008.
<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC>



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Spotlight on: *The Other Boleyn Girl*

Reviews:

Library Journal: April 15, 2002

Before Henry VIII ever considered making Anne Boleyn his wife, her older sister, Mary, was his mistress. Historical novelist Gregory (*Virgin Earth*) uses the perspective of this "other Boleyn girl" to reveal the rivalries and intrigues swirling through England. The sisters and their brother George were raised with one goal: to advance the Howard family's interests, especially against the Seymours. So when Mary catches the king's fancy, her family orders her to abandon the husband they had chosen. She bears Henry two children, including a son, but Anne's desire to be queen drives her with ruthless intensity, alienating family and foes. As Henry grows more desperate for a legitimate son and Anne strives to replace Catherine as queen, the social fabric weakens. Mary abandons court life to live with a new husband and her children in the countryside, but love and duty bring her back to Anne time and again. We share Mary's helplessness as Anne loses favor, and everyone abandons her amid accusations of adultery, incest, and witchcraft. Even the Boleyn parents won't intervene for their children. Gregory captures not only the dalliances of court but the panorama of political and religious clashes throughout Europe. She controls a complicated narrative and dozens of characters without faltering, in a novel sure to please public library fans of historical fiction. Kathy Piehl, Minnesota State Univ., Mankato

Kirkus: April 1, 2002

Historically based, page-turning story of Mary Boleyn, sister of the infamous Anne, decapitated by Henry VIII: here, as much a tale of love and lust as it is a saga about an ambitious family who used their kin as negotiable assets. Rich with period detail, the story is told by Mary, the younger sister, who is married off at 13 to William Carey, a courtier at Henry's court. Mary serves Queen Katherine, mother of the future Queen Mary, and begins her tale when her sister Anne, stylish and beautiful, returns from France to join Mary at court. The sisters' ambitious parents and their uncle, the future Duke of Norfolk, are determined to acquire power and influence, as well as titles and estates, from the king, even if it means that Mary must become his mistress. Their son George is made to work on his sisters' behalf and to live a life not of his choosing (he's homosexual and loves a fellow courtier). Mary bears the king a son, but Anne soon after uses all her wiles to make Henry divorce the Queen and marry her. The Boleyns, more ruthlessly functional than dysfunctional, continue to plot and push to achieve their ends. Mary recounts the king's wish for a male heir; his break with the Pope; Anne's skillful if criminal plotting that leads to the divorce and her marriage to Henry; the birth of the future Queen Elizabeth; and Anne's desperate attempts to bear a son. Meanwhile, she herself, widowed after her first husband dies from the plague, finds love with Sir William Stafford—the only strand of the story with possibilities for future happiness. Absorbing tale of a Renaissance family determined to climb as high as they can, whatever the cost.

Publishers Weekly: May 2002

Sisterly rivalry is the basis of this fresh, wonderfully vivid retelling of the story of Anne Boleyn. Anne, her sister Mary and their brother George are all brought to the king's court at a young age, as players in their uncle's plans to advance the family's fortunes. Mary, the sweet, blond sister, wins King Henry VIII's favor when she is barely 14 and already married to one of his courtiers. Their affair lasts several years, and she gives Henry a daughter and a son. But her dark, clever, scheming sister, Anne, insinuates herself into Henry's graces, styling herself as his adviser and confidant. Soon she displaces Mary as his lover and begins her machinations to rid him of his wife, Katherine of Aragon. This is only the beginning of the intrigue that Gregory so handily chronicles, capturing beautifully the mingled hate and nearly incestuous love Anne, Mary and George ("kin and enemies all at once") feel for each other and the toll their family's ambition takes on them. Mary, the story's narrator, is the most sympathetic of the siblings, but even she is twisted by the demands of power and status; charming George, an able plotter, finally brings disaster on his own head by falling in love with a male courtier. Anne, most tormented of all, is ruthless in her drive to become queen, and then to give Henry a male heir. Rather than settling for a



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Reviews: (continued)

picturesque rendering of court life, Gregory conveys its claustrophobic, all-consuming nature with consummate skill. In the end, Anne's famous, tragic end is offset by Mary's happier fate, but the self-defeating folly of the quest for power lingers longest in the reader's mind. (June 4) Forecast: Lovers of historical romances heavy on the history will relish this new entry from Gregory and perhaps propel it onto bestseller lists this summer.



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Discussion Questions:

1. Why does Philippa Gregory choose Mary to narrate the story? Keeping in mind the relationship between the observer and those observed, is Mary a good, trustworthy, narrator? As Mary ages, how is her loss of innocence reflected in her telling of the story?
2. Look at the exchange between Mary and her mother at the end of the first chapter. How does the author foreshadow what is to come? How do the events of the first chapter frame the entire story?
3. Discuss the Boleyn family's scheming and jockeying for favor in the court. In light of these politics, discuss the significance of Mary's explanation that she had "a talent for loving [the king]" (page 119). Is this simply a girl's fantasy? Why does Mary call herself and George "a pair of pleasant snakes" (page 131)?
4. On page 29, Mary professes her love and admiration for Queen Katherine and feels she can't betray her. In what ways are her honorable ideals compromised as she embarks on her adulterous affair with the king? Recount the whirlwind of events preceding Anne's becoming queen. Reading page 352, do you agree that "from start to finish" Mary "had no choice" but to betray Queen Katherine by taking the queen's letter to her uncle?
5. Consider pages 38 and 82. How does the author create sexual tension? How do the narrator's thoughts and feelings communicate the attraction between her and the king? Why is this important to the story of *The Other Boleyn Girl*?
6. On page 85, Anne tells Mary, "I am happy for the family. I hardly ever think about you." Do you think she's telling the truth? Later, Anne says to her sister, "We'll always be nothing to our family" (page 310). Do you think she believes this, especially given her overwhelming desire to advance her own status?
7. Why does Mary say, "I felt like a parcel..." (page 60)? What happens later to make Mary think she's no longer a "pawn" of the family, but "at the very least, a castle, a player in the game" (page 173)?
8. Look at the exchange between Mary and Anne about the king on page 72. Do you agree with Anne when she tells Mary that "you can't desire [the king] like an ordinary man and forget the crown on his head." What does this statement reveal about Anne's nature? And what does it reveal about Mary's?
9. In general, what are your impressions of the sisters? Keep in mind Anne and Mary's discussion on page 104: "So who would come after me?...I could make my own way." Also look at page 123, when Anne says, "Hear this, Mary...I will kill you." Why are these statements significant, particularly given their timing?
10. Share some of the characteristics that you like about historical fiction. For you, what aspect of *The Other Boleyn Girl* stands out the most? How does the book change your impressions of life in King Henry VIII's court? Looking at the letter on page 275, discuss the level of corruption in the court. Does it surprise you? Were you aware of Anne's dogged and exhausting pursuit of the king? Did the way Anne became queen shock you?
11. How do you feel about the idea that a woman had to be married before she could bed the king? What do you think about the king changing the laws to suit his needs? When Anne states that "Nothing will ever be the same for any woman in this country again," examine why she could believe she would be exempt from the same treatment. In other words, why didn't she realize that "when she overthrew a queen that thereafter all queens would be unsteady" (page 519)? Do you think the family realized this but persevered anyway?



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12. Discuss Mary's evolution of thinking from when she realizes that after Queen Katherine's departure, "from this time onward no wife...would be safe" with her later thought (on page 468) that "the triumph of Anne, the mistress who had become a wife, was an inspiration to every loose girl in the country." What does this say about Mary's state of mind? Is she being a reliable narrator here?
13. On page 303, George exclaims to Mary, "You cannot really want to be a nobody." Why is this such a revolutionary idea in Henry's court, and for the Boleyns in particular? What should the response have been to Mary's question to Anne (page 330) about the rewards of Anne's impending marriage to the king: "What is there for me?"
14. In King Henry's court, homosexuality was a crime. Why do you think George essentially flaunted his preference? What do you make of the intimate kiss between George and Anne that Mary witnessed? What is the impetus behind George and Anne's relationship? Discuss whether or not you believe that George slept with Anne so that she might have a son, and why.
15. Why do you think George declares that Anne is "the only Boleyn anyone will ever know or remember" (page 410)? Was that true for you before you read *The Other Boleyn Girl*? What about now?
16. After Anne is arrested, Mary pleads for her by saying, "We did nothing more than that was ordered. We only ever did as we were commanded. Is she to die for being an obedient daughter?" (page 650). What is your reaction to these arguments? Did Henry have no choice but to sentence her to death?